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Today's News

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Study Links High-School Quality With Likelihood of Earning a Degree

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San Francisco

All else being equal, the quality of a student's high school has a significant effect on the student's odds of eventually completing a college degree. That was the conclusion of a study of 4,700 students from 356 high schools that was presented here on Friday at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

The study's author, Edward B. Reeves, a professor of sociology at Morehead State University, in Kentucky, has waded into a longstanding dispute among social scientists. In a famous and controversial 1966 study, the late sociologist James S. Coleman concluded that particular schools' characteristics had very little impact on students' fates. Almost all of the variance in students' outcomes, Mr. Coleman and his colleagues wrote, could be explained by differences in their social class and family backgrounds.

Dozens of scholars have attempted to debunk Mr. Coleman over the years (and, indeed, Mr. Coleman himself partly recanted in the 1980s, writing that Catholic high schools sometimes have strong positive effects). Mr. Reeves is the latest to enter the fray.

Mr. Reeves drew on data from the National Education Longitudinal Study, a large-scale federal project that followed thousands of students from 1988, when they were in the eighth grade, until 2000, when most of them were 25 or 26 years old.

He selected a subset of students who graduated from high school on time, in 1992, and whose high schools included at least 10 students in the study. He then used data from the study to rank the students' schools along two dimensions: their academic rigor (as measured by variables such as the number of advanced mathematics credits awarded and the proportion of students taking Advanced Placement courses) and their cohesion and "integration" (as measured by variables such as the proportion of students participating in sports teams and other extracurricular activities).

Echoing Mr. Coleman, Mr. Reeves found that family-background variables, such as parents' income and their expectations that their children would attend college, play a stronger role than high-school quality in predicting whether a student will eventually complete a college degree.

Impact of School Quality

Mr. Reeves also found, however, that school quality makes a significant difference above and beyond family background. Those school-quality effects are smaller than the family-background effects, but they are still substantial.

Students at the lowest level of family background, for example, had only a 5-percent chance of completing a postsecondary degree or certificate if they graduated from a "low-academic, low-integration" high school, according to Mr. Reeves's statistical model. But students at the same low level of family background who attended a "high-academic, high-integration" high school had a 20 percent chance of completing a degree or certificate by 2000.

The "academic" and "integration" dimensions of high-school quality had almost equal effects on students' odds of completing a bachelor's degree or higher, Mr. Reeves said. But among students who earned an associate degree or a lower-level certificate, the "integration" measures did not have any predictive power; all that mattered was the high school's level of academic rigor.

In at least one of Mr. Reeves' statistical analyses, students with higher levels of family background appear to be more sensitive to variations in high-school quality. In other words, affluent students benefited from attending better high schools, or suffered from attending worse ones, more than did students from low-income families.

In his presentation on Friday, Mr. Reeves said that he hoped that high-school reform projects would take that phenomenon into account, and target their efforts in ways that would help the least-affluent students.

In a discussion of Mr. Reeves's paper, Catherine C. Riegle-Crumb, a research associate at the University of Texas at Austin's Population Research Center, said that Mr. Reeves's data might reveal that there is a level of poverty below which schools can have only weak effects. For such highly disadvantaged students, she suggested, it might be most important in the short run to put new resources into other social programs, and not into high-school reform.
